SIATRAS NUMISMATIC STUDIES, 13

Charles W. King

EARLY CHRISTIAN NUMISMATICS

COINS OF CONSTANTINE THE GREAT

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SIATRAS SERIES OF NUMISMATIC STUDIES, No. 13

Charles W. King (1818-1888)

Early Christian Numismatics -
Coins of Constantine the Great, Coins of Salonina

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EDITOR'S NOTE

In the current edition, we republish the part of the homonymous book that mostly deals with the Christian symbols depicted on the coins of the Eastern Roman Empire; the other parts of the first edition* are not related to numismatics and are therefore omitted as being out of the limits of this series.

Despite the one and a half centuries that have passed since its first edition in 1873, the book — a classic of its kind — retains its enduring interest and certainly deserves a re-edition.

The author, Charles W. King (1818–1888), was a classicist and a specialist in gems, though not an archaeologist or a numismatist! However, based on his broad knowledge of the Greek and Latin authors, he was able to trace the evolution of the Christian symbols in the coinage of the Roman emperors in a marvelous way.

D.N.S.

(*) The complete title of the first edition is

" *Early Christian Numismatics and Other Antiquarian Tracts*",
Bell & Daddy, London 1873.

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PREFACE

The little treatise which gives its title to the present volume originated in an application made to me by our Regius Professor of Divinity to point out to him any history of the introduction of Christian types upon the Roman coinage. The only book of that nature to which I was able to refer him was Rev. R. Walsh's brief essay *On the Coins*, etc., illustrating the progress of Christianity in the Early Ages; published so long ago as 1828; and which, so far as I have been able to ascertain, remains the only work in any language that takes for its exclusive subject this truly interesting and fertile province of numismatics; but its errors and incompleteness rendered it a very unsatisfactory guide to the enquirer, who consequently was obliged to trace out for himself the progress of Christian symbolism in coin-types by the aid of that invaluable, but, at the same time bewildering series, engraved by An. Banduri in the plates to his book

Numismata imperatorum romanorum a Trajano Decio usque ad Palaeologos Augustos, etc.

by hunting up amongst the multitude of reverses the dispersed examples that offered any indication of the nature sought for — a task of considerable labour.

Our repeated conversations upon various particulars in this research had the effect of turning my attention to the whole subject, and to the method in which it might most intelligibly and comprehensively be treated. Coins, especially Roman imperial, had always been a favourite study with me, and (as a matter of course with the English collector) those of the late period, supplying the information required, were those most abundantly brought under my notice through their perpetual disinterment in all parts of Britain.

The foundation for any treatise of the nature contemplated had been already laid by that *coryphaeus* of Christian archaeologists, the learned and laborious Father Garrucci. As it would be a mere impertinence in another to attempt to remodel what he has already done so

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perfectly in this line, I have commenced my work with a close translation of his memoir

Des signes de christianisme qui se trouvent sur les monnaies de Constantin, etc.

supplemented by notes and remarks suggested by my own experience as a collector, or by my reading in the authors of the times with which, we are concerned. Garrucci has confined his enquiry to the period of the earliest introduction of the badges of Christianity upon the coinage, and consequently it did not fall within his plan to carry the investigation farther down than the elevation of all the sons of Constantine to the rank of *Augusti*. Beyond that period, the absence of all competitors in the field has emboldened me to pursue the history down to the extinction of the last traces of the Roman empire.

"Dans le pays des aveugles le borgne est roi" is a maxim which will, I hope, secure a favourable reception for this first attempt. It is certainly most interesting to mark how the momentous change in religion shows itself in these impartial and imperishable records of their times — the coins of the empire — first by symbols sparingly and timidly introduced, mere accessories to old established types, then by allegories more plainly avowing the Faith, and lastly by direct representations of divine personages, which finally banish every other decoration from the field. The study of these aids to history will probably inspire others, as it did myself, with a higher estimation of the character of the celebrated author of this revolution — a character to which moderns are inclined to do too little justice, by the natural revulsion from that extravagant praise of which for so many ages it had been the theme. These medals, with their modest and inobtrusive confessions of Faith, are in themselves the best testimony to the wisdom and moderation of their issuer in carrying out that mighty change to which he was urged by mature conviction of its necessity. But the first Christian caesar, bred up amidst trials and dangers of every sort, carried successfully through all by the support of men of every creed, and a true patriot above everything else, had fully obeyed the Apostle's precept, "to try all things, hold fast to that which is good". Before openly renouncing the religion of his fathers, he had carefully weighed the pretensions of the other novel doctrines then disputing men's minds with the Catholic, "cum limatius superstí-

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tionum quaereret sectas, Manichaeorum et similium", as Ammian incidentally informs us in a very remarkable passage (XV 13). And when his decision was finally made, even then his consideration for the prejudices of others is manifest in his selection of coin-types in which no opinion could find reasonable grounds of offence. His "Invincible Sun", so acceptable to the numerous Mithraicists of the age, could not scandalise the equally numerous Christians, who easily recognised their own "Sun of Righteousness" in the allegory, as Chrysostom himself interprets the heathen title: his "Mars the Defender" expressed the military genius of the sovereign equally with the ancient patron deity of Rome; his other coin-devices are the emblems of "Glory", "Hope", "Tranquillity", and "Peace" — the unanimous aspirations of every creed. Such wise impartiality in the all-powerful victor is the more to be admired when we take into consideration the insidious influence in the other direction, to which the declining years of his life were necessarily exposed — an influence the true spirit whereof is to be seen in the insulting and sanguinary laws on religion passed soon after by the priest-ridden Theodosius.

There is another pleasing feature in this investigation: these medallic records bear convincing testimony to the great emperor's love for the arts, although then so sadly on the wane. The large variety of the types on both sides, the ingenuity displayed in their conception, the even poetic feeling that manifestly inspired some in the list, the admirable workmanship of such whose intrinsic importance demanded special care (and which puts to shame the best productions of modern mints) — all combine to render the Constantinian series a garden of delight, and a refreshing halting-place for the numismatist about to plunge into the barbarism that speedily ensued.

The coins of the Lower and of the Byzantine empire, though generally with little to recommend them in the way of art, are yet interesting from the occasional gleams of taste discoverable in the invention of their types, but more instructive by their affording a faithful mirror of the transition in style and taste from the antique into the regular mediaeval. Their variations in workmanship curiously indicate the vicissitudes of the empire: they manifest the utter prostration of all things under the immediate successors of Justinian, and the sickly rejuvenescence of power and the arts under the influence of

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the Comnenes. Of yet greater interest is it to observe how they become the models for the respective coinages of Europe whenever the different tribes of barbarian usurpers have settled down into any semblance of civilised life; and this consideration, if pursued by one better acquainted with continental numismatics than myself, would, as my own limited experience assures me, lead to very extensive results of much historical value.

To the discussion of Christian coin-types an appropriate supplement is found in the history of the medals commemorating the Saviour Himself, and of the wondrous Emerald (fit comparison to the Sangraal) which they all claim for their ultimate source. These medals, ever and anon turning up to the bewilderment of all, to the deception of the unwary collector, and the immense profit of fraudulent dealers, were briefly treated of in my memoir *Upon the Vernicle of the Vatican*, which dealt more particularly with the pictures and engraved gems of the like nature. The subject has now been rendered complete in all its bearings by the most obliging permission of Albert Way to supplement it with his essay on the medals specially considered — a tract full of that immense and accurate research which characterises every one of his contributions to archaeological knowledge.

Some excuse may perhaps be required for the number of notes appended to the text, many of which, as far as the subject is concerned, had more suitably been embodied in it. But the unexpected length of time occupied in getting this small number of sheets passed through the press has given space for the growth of a crop of *"pensées d'escalier"*, which my readers, let me hope, will prefer having out of their proper place to not having at all. In a science like archaeology, based so largely upon materials supplied by the perpetual accidents of time and place, a field no sooner appears exhausted than fresh suggestions or discoveries necessitate the renewal or extension of one's previous labours.

C.W. King
Trinity College, Cambridge.
January 1873.

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CHAPTER 1

SIGNS OF CHRISTIANITY FOUND UPON THE MEDALS OF CONSTANTINE, HIS FAMILY, AND HIS SUCCESSORS[1]

On the 6th of the calends of November (October 27th), A.D. 312 — all historians are agreed upon this point — Constantine, under the protection of the Cross, succeeded in destroying Maxentius in the vicinity of the Milvian bridge, and made his triumphal entry into Rome, where he caused himself to be represented with this victorious emblem in his hand.

> "Constantine was admonished in a dream to paint on his soldiers' shields the heavenly sign of God, and so to give battle. He does as he is commanded, and with the letter X placed transversely, having one extremity bent round, he marks their shields with Christ. Armed with this sign, his army draws the sword."

This is the express statement in the very words of Lactantius, preceptor to the emperor's eldest son and very probably an eye-witness of the fact *(De Mort. Persec.*, c. 44). From that moment no doubt can exist as to Constantine's public profession of faith in the doctrines of Christianity. No obstacle, therefore, could intervene to prevent the engraving upon the coinage and even on the armour of the emperor, the figure of the cross, and Christian monograms.

It is not to be supposed that the association in the imperial dignity of Licinius, who was a pagan, had the power to deter him from such public profession, since from that time forwards the two princes came to an agreement to protect the Christians; they sanctioned the reli-

[1] Des signes de Christianisme qui se trouvent sur les monnaies de Constantin et de ses fils, avant et après la mort de Licinius. R. Garucci, *Revue Numismatique* 1866.

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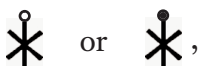
medals of the kings of the Bosporus, *i.e.* on those of Sauromates, Rescuporis, etc. , although the asterisk, or star, is commonly figured like the sigla , which amongst the Romans served to indicate the denarius.

The Greek letter *χῖ*, Χ, traversed by a line or bar placed vertically, and terminated at the upper end by a circle or by a small dot, *i.e.*



may be compared with the sigla

,

which denotes, it is supposed, the commander of a thousand men (= *χιλίαρχος*), and which, crossed by a horizontal bar, makes its appearance on some coins of the Ptolemies.

As for the cross with the four equal arms, the most ancient example, and which at the same time approximates the most closely to it in form, is furnished by a statue in the British Museum, found at Nineveh, and which carries this sign suspended from the neck.[5] At a later date we find a cross formed of simple lines, , and sometimes accompanied with globules, or dots, , upon the painted vases; symbols having perhaps for their origin the mark (fylfot), often employed in antiquity as the sign of safety. Sometimes these different kinds of cross are meant for nothing more than a star; for example, upon the complete series of the coins of Eugubbium; where it is accompanied with the lunar crescent; and again, over the heads of the Dioscuri upon an antique mirror and on the consular denarii.

A similar cruciform intention is observable upon a coin of Cossutius Meridianus, a moneyer of Julius Caesar's, who writes his own name in the form of a cross, apparently in allusion to the star Venus.[6]

---

[5] This "Maltese cross" figured as a four-rayed star is the proper symbol of Shamas, the Assyrian sun-god; as the eight-rayed star is of his consort Gula.

[6] Much more probably in allusion to the "noonday sun" that gave him his cognomen, through that fondness for the rebus so conspicuous in the mintage of the times. A striking example is the moon and the seven stars upon the coinage of Fulcinius Trio.

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28. CONSTANTINOPOLIS

Bust of the city wearing a helmet decorated with a laurel wreath; in the left hand a sceptre.

℞. Victory to the left, standing upon a ship, holding a sceptre in the right hand, and resting the other on a shield, on which are seen five globules arranged in the form of a quincunx; to the left in the field the monogram ☧; exergue: S CONST.
(Turin; Vienna; Feuardent, *Rev. Num.* 1853, VII 3).

29. VRBS ROMA.

Bust of the city, with crested helmet, to the left.

℞. The wolf and the twins; above them the monogram ☧ between two stars; exergue P CONS or S CONS (Garcia della Torre). Upon another example (Lovatti), we read distinctly ROMA, preceded and followed by indistinct letters. On the example described by Eckhel, the mint-mark is MOST; and on that by Tanini no letters occur in the exergue.

30. CONSTANTINVS MAX. AVG.

Laureated bust to the right.

℞. SPES PVBLICA

Labarum, upon which are embroidered three globules; on the top, above the cross-piece from which the banner hangs, is the monogram ☧; below, a serpent transfixed by the spiked end of the flagstaff; exergue CONS. First published by Baronius; Eckhel describes an example in the Waldeck cabinet; Tanini (p. 275) a third in his own collection. A fourth is described by Gaillard in the della Torre cabinet; this piece reads on the obverse CONSTANTINVS AVG.[9]

[9] This most important one amongst the numismatic memorials of the triumph of Christianity is unfortunately of a rarity commensurate with its interest. Although discovered so long ago as the times of Baronius, Eckhel himself knew but a single specimen, that in the Waldeck cabinet, and the most experienced numismatist of our day, Feuardent, had doubted of its genuine

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CHAPTER 2

ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM

Thus far extends the elaborate dissertation of the indefatigable Garucci, which it is my purpose to supplement by a notice of other types in the same series which, though not presenting Christian symbols directly, were evidently dictated to the designers by the influence of the new religion. But before entering upon this hitherto untrodden field, some statements of the learned Father advanced in the preceding pages appear to me to be open to several valid objections.

To begin with those occurring latest in his memoir. The "bridge", which he interprets as a memorial of the rout and death of Maxentius, cannot possibly have any reference to that event, the scene of which was the Pons Milvius *(Ponte Molle)*, then as now a substantial stone edifice of many arches, whilst the bridge seen upon the little coin in question (a reverse of the *minimus* with the head and legend

POPVLVS ROMANVS)

is a military bridge of boats, guarded by two towers, têtes de pont, at each end; clearly commemorating some noted performance of the kind in crossing the Danube, or other great river, in those expeditions against the Sarmatians, or similar barbarians, which shed a lustre on the concluding years of Constantine's life.

That the memory of Maxentius and his defeat had become obsolete long before the issue of these curious little coins may be proved by the observation of the mint-mark, for they all bear that of Constantinople, the foundation of which was long subsequent to the fall of Maxentius and conquest of Italy.

Garucci is certainly wrong in assigning the coins with reverse of the sun-star within a wreath to the mother and wife of Constantine. The Helena and Fausta, whose coins exhibit this remarkable symbol, both take in the legend the title of N.F. Now this title, *Nobilissima Fæmina*, is beyond all doubt the feminine equivalent to *Nobilissimus*

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Khosru Parviz, had become possessed of it at the time of his capture of the Holy City. The medal in question, equal to the dignity of its subject in material and size, being of fine gold and five inches in diameter, exhibits the bust of Heraclius with a long beard, which he grasps in his hand, supported upon a crescent, and with eyes devoutly lifted up to heaven, whence streams the light of the Shechinah. Out of his mouth proceed the words

Illumina vultum tuum, Dominus

and below,

Super tenebras nostras militando in gentibus;

around runs his style in Greek. The reverse shows the victor seated in what the artist meant for a triumphal car, but which is literally copied from a mediaeval travelling-carriage with curtains; it is drawn by three horses, and guided by a driver on foot. Heraclius wears a crown, much resembling the papal tiara, and holds a long cross in lieu of sceptre; he is supposed to be uttering the prayer placed in the field in Greek capitals,

Δόξα ἐν ὑψίστοις Χ(ριστ)ῷ τῷ Θεῷ ὅτι διάρρηξεν (sic)
σιδηρᾶς πύλας καὶ ἠλευθέρωσεν ἅγιον βασι. Ἡράκλε.

The legend on this side is

Super aspidem et basiliscum ambulavit,
conculcavit leonem et draconem.

The three lamps hanging above, to which the victor lifts his eyes, are supposed to denote the church of St. Anastasius, in which the Cross, when restored by the Persians, was deposited until the emperor had finished his preparations for carrying it to its proper resting-place. The conception of the whole design, considered as intended for a monument of the time, is absurd in the extreme, the Byzantine caesar being made to wear that grotesque king David physiognomy so familiar to our eyes in the old tapestries of Flemish manufacture. This incongruity struck du Cange, even in his uncritical age; who, however, contents himself with remarking that the emperor's costume is not that of the times of Heraclius (*Dis. num.* 65). There can be no doubt that the medal is the birth of the ludicrously disguised Gothic taste, known as Flemish renaissance, so fertile in religious art; for the

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their long ears at the skies", as Juvenal and Petronius express it; and again, the scrupulous care displayed so conspicuously in the arrangement of Constantine's wavy *chevelure* in the portrait before us, and the extreme sumptuousness of the diadem with which it is encircled, go far to justify the satirical remarks of old Silenus in the text upon his coxcombry in that particular, and his womanish fondness for splendour in apparel.

The *technical execution* of this head is a lesson to every modern die-sinker; the relief is not too high for convenience in a current coin; the surface is kept quite flat, yet has all the forms modelled upon it with wonderful effect, in the style practised by our T. Simon in his portraits of Cromwell, the glory of the English mint, but which none of his successors there have had either the ability or the taste to copy. The weight of this piece exceeds that of our sovereign by no more than a couple of grains, yet how immeasurably superior is it in boldness and the expression of life! The execution of this medallion strikingly exemplifies, at the same time, a very curious anomaly in the history of art. Although the head does not yield in any requisite quality to the finest of those that preceded it in the imperial series, yet the figure of the *Dea Roma* on the reverse is altogether out of drawing, and carelessly finished in the details. The same discrepancy between the heads and the full-length figures cannot fail to strike the intelligent numismatist as conspicuous in the coinage from Severus downwards.

The ability for modelling portraits from the life seems to have survived at Rome, and even in the provinces (as the coins of the Gallic and British usurpers plainly manifest), long after figure-drawing had fallen into utter decay.

The mint-mark **SMN** shows this coin to be the production of the mint of Nicomedia, a favourite residence of Constantine. As Eusebius was bishop of that city, his testimony as to the significance of the gesture acquires still more weight, since from his position at court he must have been acquainted with all the circumstances of its emission.

The woodcut, as excellent a facsimile of an original as the art has ever produced, is drawn to the actual size of the medallion, which belongs to the British Museum.

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